7. Bureaucracy, Overbearing Attitudes, and Necessity in Education

> The distribution according to ranks or degrees has a dual purpose: to highlight deviations, to hierarchize qualities, competencies, and aptitudes; but also to punish and reward. The penal function of the arrangement and the ordinal nature of the sanction. Discipline rewards through the simple process of promotions, allowing one to gain ranks and positions; it punishes by causing regression and degradation.[1]
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> Michel Foucault

At some point in every human being's life, they must decide whether they will live the rest of their life in fear or not.

The framework of domination, which I have already explored in another reading, is of remarkable clarity and simplicity. With only three related or connected nodes/places, it explains such a variety of circumstances in which domination manifests that its power, to the attentive observer, is immense. These parts of the framework are the dominant, the dominated, and the hostage. And it is something that exists 'beneath' our lives, parasitically, without us noticing. It simply—simply!—gives a deep shape to our reality, to our existence, 'morphologizing' it, and thus we become dominant, dominated, and even hostages in various realms.

This reading I present today is, then, nothing more than the passionate exposition of a variant of the problem of domination. In fact, if there were no asymmetry of power between human beings, there would be no unbreakable and perverse bond between bureaucracy, arrogance, and necessity. And, obviously, it should also be stated that this relationship is not exclusive to the educational system. When a neighbor wants the municipal government to remove a tree threatening to fall on their roof, it is not they who can cut it down according to municipal provisions. First, they must go through a series of procedures, and maybe one day, a grumpy official will deign to go and cut the tree down. The neighbor cares that their roof is not destroyed by a twisted tree eaten by insects, and that makes them a hostage. Because the primary hostage is the well-being of their house. They care. They care deeply. Then, what I have called 'hostagehood' shifts from the first hostage to the second. The municipal government dominates, and the neighbor is dominated, as the government does not care about the neighbor's roof, only the procedure. It is only interested in whether it can take advantage of the situation. Nothing more. In between, bureaucracy.

[1] Excerpt taken from Discipline and Punish. Siglo XXI Edition, 2002 (original 1975). Page 186.

To properly understand this and not merely refer to an etymology (etymologies are insufficient and clumsy as explanations, since language evolves and distances itself from its origins), we must think of it as ordered power structures, with the capacity for decision-making and sanctions over aspects of the life of people who are part of it or not. It is a small god made of human beings; of very small human beings. And therefore, an imperfect god, who acts for obscure reasons and who—this seems the most worrying—needs to make others suffer to feel powerful.

Bureaucracy is a form of cruelty, created by human beings to have power over other human beings; it is the exercise of domination through cruelty. If it organizes institutions, it also destroys freedom. It is perceived as dominant over individuality and expresses this by placing obstacles and sanctions. But it also expresses it by using a special language. Domination through language is singularly necessary for bureaucracy. The ultimate way to regulate the subjectivity of a person subject to the bureaucrat's dynamic is to 'teach them to speak,' and the height of the bureaucrat's achievement is when the victim adopts their jargon, thus acquiring thought structures imposed by institutional interests.

For example, an educational reform could be a 'transformation of education'. Third year of high school, 'non-venerable from EBI,' capacities, 'competencies'... an official promoting impersonal administrative decisions, a 'mentor'. And the teacher is mercilessly thrown into a world of acronyms that, when left unexplained, become the tiles with which the path to hell must be paved.

As an introduction, this is enough. Whatever is said, the domination dynamic is not only correct as an abstract formulation, but it is also the one that truly provides the latent structure to realities like this one, which we could simply call 'institutional domination over regulated individuality'. The regulated subject (literally 'subject') is subordinated and fully connected to a higher power structure; subject, tied to it.

My intention now is not to provide a detailed critique of the ongoing educational reform in the classrooms of the República Oriental del Uruguay. My beautiful intellectual wings get dirty when they must touch such a topic, so impregnated with ideology and other miseries. As a public servant, I am compelled to act according to its guidelines, though not obliged. Obligation would override my autonomy as a teacher. As long as I stay within a certain margin of acceptability, my only risk is being evaluated negatively by my superiors.

The Centrality of the Student in the Teaching-Learning Process

One of the things that angers me the most is clumsiness. And especially clumsiness disguised as good intentions. I want to think that this idea of the "centrality of the student" is clumsiness and not malice. You read the phrase, and there is nothing better intended and beautiful than placing the student at the center of education. There it is! Look at the kid! Like a vase in the middle of the table! What kind of brutal spirit would be capable of denying something like that? But in reality, the center of education is not the student. The center of education, if it really has one (which is yet to be seen), is in fact the education itself; that is, that the learning process is actually fulfilled in the students. But for that to happen, someone must teach, something to someone. So, all three are important in education: the one who teaches (the teacher), what is taught (content and skills), and finally, who is taught (the student). And note that I say "student", but I should rather say "pupil". I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but in Secondary Education, starting with this reform they call "educational transformation", they seem to be forgetting about real students, that is, those who study. Since the overwhelming majority of them don't, and view educational institutions as social clubs or overfed daycare centers, it seems someone thought it would be a good idea to lower the bar, shift the focus away from "studying" and replace it with "participating in activities". And the consequences are profound.

In the teachers' working day, we have a certain amount of time with each group. It's not much when you consider the syllabi of individual subjects. That is, if we really intend to cover the topics relevant to our subjects and actually want the students to learn (with all the difficulties we face), it's a bad idea for us to work on projects that divert our time and energy. If we truly intend to teach Literature, as is my case, but I have to dedicate time and energy to various tasks in projects proposed by the "educational" center, I end up wasting time that should be spent on developing my subject. And the problem isn't just that the students don't know what "The Divine Comedy" is about, but that through "The Divine Comedy", I teach them to read, to write, correct oral expression errors, generate awareness about correct and incorrect uses of language, create a space for discussion on the works where we address their historical and philosophical context. So, we are bombarded with "suggestions" for interdisciplinary work that end up having the opposite effect of what someone might have supposed: instead of students learning in a different way, they create ignorant people without the minimum expression skills.

But this is not the worst aspect of the so-called "centrality of the student". The problem lies in what we exactly mean by "putting the student in the center". One thing is to consider them, to take them into account. That is something we must and should have always done. When we begin courses, teachers assess the abilities and difficulties of the students to enhance the first and address the second. But one thing is to take the students' characteristics into account, and another is to give them the power to

decide on the institution’s guidelines, including the contents of the subjects. Of course, I know that I have a "content-driven" perspective. I have it, and I uphold it. It’s unbelievable that someone would propose abandoning content (or that they would suggest it, intentionally veiled, presenting it as mere "excuses"). The generations to come will inevitably be more ignorant than today’s ignorant. But there’s also the problem of the students’ mental maturity. Most are still very close to childhood. At least in the first four years of high school, this is evident. There are exceptions, but with the intention of favoring the "weaker" ones, we are "empowering" the students in such a way that we make an irresponsible selection of content that is nothing more than the reflection of the students’ irresponsibility.

I like to compare the work of teachers to that of doctors. Not because I want to give the impression that they have the same value, but because I believe the education of a human being is of enormous importance in their life. Therefore, the work of the educator must be taken very seriously.

Now, if it is true that the doctor can offer options to their patients when they are of an age to make decisions about their health, they will not do so when it comes to children or adolescents. In such cases, the doctor will consult the responsible adults, but not the patients themselves. And they won’t do so for a simple reason: young people are not yet mature enough to make important decisions about their lives. When we need to take into account the students and their concerns when educating them, does necessarily addressing those concerns constitute a responsible decision by the system, or is it an empty gesture? This is serious because we are throwing away the education of entire generations by waving a politically correct discourse, based on decisions emanating from desks that are far, very far from the classrooms.

Computerization

A few years ago, the physical paper notebook was replaced by the digital one. This, far from being a real advance towards reducing administrative work, has turned out worse. The physical notebook was a symbol of the professor's position in front of the students and did not constitute a constant door to surveillance. Today, teachers are completely exposed.

Be careful. I don’t think it’s wrong to be exposed as long as one knows how to do their job and does it conscientiously. The problem is that, in the current situation, it doesn’t matter whether you do your job well; you have to do it the way the authorities want it to be done. The notebooks must be filled with new evaluation methods and interdisciplinary objectives that, as much as possible, do not focus on content but on "competencies." And dozens of procedures appear that the teacher seems obligated to learn. But I wonder, what level of obligation do we have? Are we being suggested new activities and procedures, or are they being imposed and mandated on us? Because a professional like me, with

fifteen years of experience and a real teaching degree, believes they are fully entitled to invoke their academic freedom, even against the decisions of the hierarchy. Because there is a greater hierarchy than all, and that is my conviction.

The New Optimization of Teaching: More Work for the Same Pay?

There is an idea that always lingers, like a sweet threat (oxymoron, teacher, oxymoron!), over the teaching profession. It's the concept, conjured with malicious rhetoric as a pretext for sacrifice and patience, of "vocation". Like with love, the idea of vocation forces us to do things we wouldn't do if we weren't driven by a feeling. Thus, anyone who dares to complain about working conditions or pay is immediately suspected of lacking vocation. Which is the same as turning them into a kind of usurper of the place that should be occupied by a true teacher, someone who "does things from the heart".

These ideas, with all their functional romanticism, make any materialistic approach to teaching fall under suspicion as well. But a teacher is a worker. A special worker, perhaps, and I have been heard proclaiming in the hallways of high schools, full of idealism, that first I am a person, then I am a teacher, and only after that am I a worker. Which amounts to saying that I always prioritize my rights and obligations as a person, then my rights and obligations as a teacher, and only then do I consider myself a worker. This has certainly not earned me admirers.

But we are workers, and workers basically sell two things: our time and our capacity for work; our skills. A salary, benefits, and certain obligations are stipulated. And then the worker, whether a teacher or not, if they fulfill their obligations, receives that compensation for their work. Now I ask, what happens if suddenly the amount that the salaried worker receives does not change, but their workload increases? What happens if they continue to be compensated the same way, but they must dedicate more of their life and skills to fulfilling their work? That is simply lowering the salary in real terms. The money is the same, but if they must work more for the same amount, that money buys more work—work that the worker invests from their time and energy.

When, in the context of the current educational reform carried out by the previous government of Luis Lacalle Pou, Pablo da Silveira, Robert Silva, Victoria Cáceres, and Jenifer Cherro (among many other political officials), it is "proposed" that the teacher must keep a detailed digital record of every activity they carry out, meticulously planning every move and constantly diagnosing, what is being done is, in the background, lowering their salary. And it's curious that teachers, relatively intelligent people, don't realize this. I hope we do realize, but that something else happens, because otherwise, I can't explain this mess: the other thing I suppose happens is that many either don't care—as someone told me—or are afraid.

For me, any response is better than fear. I prefer to work among cynics than among cowards. It's true that "we are subjected to hierarchies" (allow me a moment to savor the sweetness of the phrase), "subjected to hierarchies". I mean, "subjected". But be careful, let's not forget that, especially in the public system, it's not so easy to fire a teacher; to tell them: "go home, you're no good". Maybe in a private school, it could be done without much protocol, unleashing cruelty, but in the public sector, the only thing that can be done is to rate them poorly to harm them. A score that the teacher can later contest.

I think this is fundamental because if we fear losing our job, we will truly be "subjected". Is that what we want for our lives? Is that what we thought our work would be when we studied for years and years to get to the place we occupy? Who is stealing our autonomy and our academic freedom? From which gloomy office do these orders disguised as suggestions come?

Gamification

Play, kids, play and laugh now, because tomorrow you will be ignorant! If we don't agree on the purpose of institutions, we will always have defective institutions. What are prisons for? To punish or to reform? If we only wanted to deprive people of their freedom, we could just create a giant five-star hotel and put all prisoners there. But soon the prisons would explode with people. More than they do now, even. Prisons are not like five-star hotels; they are more like pedestrian versions of hell. Places where there is hardly any chance of reeducating someone so they can reintegrate into society and take up a place that is not in crime. Because ideally, both functions should be fulfilled. Incarceration is a punishment, but we should think of it as a rehabilitation process.

We incarcerate people in inhumane conditions, people who perhaps wouldn't be rehabilitated even in optimal conditions.

This also happens with educational institutions. Play is the way to learn. We use an unnecessary anglicism like "gamificación" when we could simply say "ludificación". Are we sure we are still educating through play? Isn't it an empty policy, lacking real meaning? What do students learn, how much do they learn through play? In my experience, ludification can teach certain habits, provide guidelines for relationships, and maybe some content, but the traditional class cannot—or should not—be replaced by games.

So, should high schools entertain, amuse, or educate? Poor things! They must not get bored!

But the absurdity goes further. In the management of the digital gradebook, they suggest using traffic lights, where choosing a "light" (green, yellow, or red) marks the students' situation according to the

course's objectives and their achievements... meaning they have even gamified the teachers' grade-book. This, along with the tacit prohibition of certain expressions and the suggestion of using specific verbs in lesson plans, is, to me, directly an insult to my office.

Distrust in the figure of the educator

Distrust in the educator's figure has its roots in the heterogeneity of the teaching body. There are long-standing prejudices about how teachers carry out their work, and the universe of teachers, which is extremely diverse—let's admit it—sometimes seems to justify this distrust.

I will not be the one to claim all teachers are flawless or defend all of them. Throughout my experience in various high schools, I've seen all kinds of cases and specimens. From those who taught only five classes throughout the entire year (causing damage difficult to evaluate in the education of dozens of adolescents), to new teachers trained in teacher training institutes of dubious quality, to professors trained at the Instituto de Profesores "Artigas". Professors who clearly used their classes to preach their political beliefs and some who simply spent their time talking about football while waiting for the bell. I've seen it all.

It's understandable then that there is distrust of the teaching staff. But such distrust is also a way of attacking those of us who know we do our jobs well. In my case, I've gone through several years of study, and no one, none of those who know me and studied with me, can say I went to exams to see what would happen. I prepared and aimed for good grades. However, that wasn't the attitude of many colleagues. Let each one's conscience judge.

When distrust of teachers arises, their competence, preparation, and the value of their degrees are questioned. I believe that sometimes hierarchies are either overconfident or unaware. There are aspects of a teacher's course planning that they should not interfere with. While they can suggest, they should not harass the accredited and prepared staff member. Distrust is not just about teachers but also about the system itself. They know there are many teachers who aren't well-prepared and try to homogenize, directly confronting more experienced and senior teachers. They think that in the best case, this will result in better education, but all they do is increase the daily discomfort of the teaching staff.

This distrust is a form of arrogance. And it is because it minimizes the staff, the teacher. It reduces them to the status of a civil servant and disregards the mystique of the educator. Even disregarding the teacher's preparation and evaluation of their courses, which should be exclusively their right. Or at least it should be. Anyway, I'm sure they think twice before interfering with a teacher of grade four or above,

but I also know that all arrogance is useful to stoke the fire of bureaucracy, which burns especially when fueled by the fear of the subordinate and the shortcomings of the superior.

And why would the subordinate be afraid? I would like to pause here because the flaws of the superior only explain a very small, insignificant soul. The fear of the subordinate is more interesting, as it is multifactorial. The subordinate holds a place in a hierarchical chain, but they are also a parent, a child, and a person with credit card debt, rent to pay, electricity, water, car insurance, or alimony to pay for a child. In short (irony intended), they are constrained by bills. So, the subordinate is not only a subordinate in the work hierarchy but also an economic debtor. They have many reasons to worry. They are not in a position to exercise their rights because they do not want to risk their livelihood in any way.

To put it bluntly: if they are forced to eat shit, they will eat shit.

And personally, it doesn't bother me if they do. It's a life decision that I have no right to judge because life decisions belong to each individual. Perhaps I decide not to commit myself financially so I'm not forced to eat shit if they order me to. But there are ways to go about it... One thing is to eat shit with a smile and ask for more; convinced that it's what needs to be done. Another thing is to eat it with a disgusted face. Finally, we could eat it while vomiting every now and then, complaining, recognizing the vile nature of what we're putting in our mouths.

It's those who smile and ask for more that scare me. They are convinced that everything is as it should be. They question nothing. And if they do, they will never do it in public. They are afraid, and fear is an implacable force. Fear is everywhere and it is a terrible disease because it kills the soul. Fear is perfectly aligned with arrogance and need. They are links in a chain. Without fear, arrogance would have no effect. Without need, there would be no fear. It is a great cruelty to be forced into submission due to economic commitments.

To close: conscientious objection

A doctor is asked to perform euthanasia. Another is asked to perform an abortion. They refuse. Both doctors are "subjected to hierarchies". They raise a conscientious objection; their personal value system (defending life) is in conflict with the institutional mandate received. Are they fired? Are they subjected to an inquiry?

A child from a devout Catholic family is imposed an evidently atheist reading of the Bible. How does the family see this? What do the parents do if they can't afford a private school?

A young person is recruited for war. They refuse. They would never kill another human being. Are they judged?

Why couldn't teachers raise a conscientious objection and accept the consequences? How would the conscientious objection framework apply in this case?

Is education relevant in a young person's life? And more broadly: is education relevant in anyone's life? For me, the answer is a resounding "yes". And I want to highlight an argument I've received from some teachers (from a teacher, no less) who told me it should be important, but it isn't because students don't take their education seriously. Assuming that's true: what are we supposed to do as teachers? Follow the ignorant and childish thought of the students or try to change their mind? Well, for me, there's nothing to discuss. Is following the student's logic the famous "student-centered" approach? It's clear that educational institutions can't reinforce the idea that it's better not to study. And that's exactly what's happening; with the change in approaches, the aggressive intrusion of "gamification", and the shifting of the educational focus to "competencies" at the expense of content, high schools are effectively turning into factories of ignorance. Yes, they were already that way, but now we must add the imposition of a new language and way of thinking for teachers (language and thought are two sides of the same coin).

It's curious that when these things are questioned by those promoting them, they talk about recycling lesson plans (copy/paste) and unrestricted use of artificial intelligence, showing a complete lack of professionalism and demonstrating, to our horror, who we are being "subjected to hierarchies" by.

Things were already bad, I'm not deceived. Since I've been aware, things have always been bad in education. My awareness goes back to the second half of the 1980s and beyond. But today we live, from my perspective, in a moment where the system itself is trying to expel teachers trained in the previous model; they know we won't tolerate certain impositions: it's either betrayal of our convictions, conflict, or escape. The model we were educated in was one where the teacher gave the lesson, students took notes, interacted with the teacher and their peers, and then studied for their written exams. It was a model of effort. All of this is quickly becoming a thing of the past, and a dynamic is being normalized that reaches its peak every day in supposedly educational institutions, now dressed in hypocritical self-deception.